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SUBJECT: NEW INTERVIEWS WITH VISAS-93 APPLICANTS SHOW GRADUAL  
PROGRESS IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS AND IN THE VISAS-93 PROCESS

REF: 05 HCMC 1217 AND PREVIOUS; B) HCMC 29; C) 05 HCMC 1217

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. In March, ConGen conducted private interviews with 12 VISAS-93 (family reunification) Central Highlands ethnic minority beneficiary families in HCMC. These interviews show that conditions for ethnic minority families -- including religious freedom -- continue to improve gradually. Almost all the applicants told us that they received government financial and material support. They were able to travel to HCMC freely and to receive required documents from local officials. Some of the interviewees contradicted elements of the claims their husbands made to officials in Cambodia following their flight from Vietnam in 2001/2002. Sixty seven percent of VISAS-93 cases to date have received passports. End Summary.

#### A Window on Conditions in the Central Highlands

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¶2. (SBU) In March, HCMC's Refugee and Resettlement Section interviewed twelve families as part of their family reunification (VISAS 93) processing. The petitioning husbands had fled to Cambodia following protests in the Central Highlands in February 2001. As in past processing cycles (ref A), ConGen PolOff met in private with these families in an effort to develop unfiltered accounts of conditions for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Of the 12 families, eight families were from Gia Lai, three from Dak Nong, and one from Dak Lak provinces. Of the families from Gia Lai province, seven were ethnic Jrai and one was ethnic Bahnar. Two of the three families from Dak Nong province were ethnic Ede, one was ethnic Mnong. The family from Dak Lak also was ethnic Ede.

#### Demographics and Living Standards

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¶3. (SBU) All 12 told us that their villages were electrified; ten of the 12 had electricity in their homes. Two ethnic Jarai families in Gia Lai province did not have access to electricity as their homes were too far away from the electric grid. Only four families (two Ede families in Dak Nong and two Jarai families in Gia Lai) had running water in their homes. The rest obtain water from local wells or nearby rivers.

¶4. (SBU) The 12 women told us that their children were attending school. The highest-grade completed for any family member was the 11th grade. In general, the education level of children tended to be higher than that of their parents, with some adult interviewees having never attended school.

¶5. (SBU) All interviewees were farmers. Principal crops were rice, coffee, cassava and cashews. All families said they received money transfers from their relatives in the United

States. Some received a few hundred dollars on a monthly basis, others tens of dollars on a handful of occasions. There was also no consistent transmission method for these funds. A few receive money via wire transfer to banks or the local post office. Others said they received funds through private intermediaries. We could only document one case where authorities prevented a Visa-93 beneficiary from receiving funds from the United States.

The ethnic Mnong interviewee from Dak Nong told us that in 2004 provincial police seized VND 5 million (USD 315) from her husband because it was "illegally sent." The authorities never returned this money. This same woman later received five payments of USD 100 from her husband via "other villagers, without further difficulty from police.

#### Representation and Government Assistance

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¶16. (SBU) In Gia Lai, seven of the eight families said that local police and authorities largely were from the local ethnic minority community. Only one Gia Lai family claimed to live in a village with majority ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) police and administrators. In Dak Nong and Dak Lak, there was much less ethnic minority representation in local police and government. The one family from Dak Lak added that their community was ethnically divided between a Kinh Village -- Blech A -- and an ethnic minority village -- Blech B. All police and politicians in both sub-villages are ethnic Vietnamese except for the village elder of Blech B who is Ede.

¶17. (SBU) Most families said that they received assistance from the government. For example, interviewees from Gia Lai province said that they received free salt, rice, blankets, clothes, and access to a clinic where they can obtain free immunizations and medical care. Two families from Gia Lai added that the government provided houses to the poorest families in their villages. The family from Dak Lak province received housing assistance in addition to receiving land and rice. Only one interviewee, a Jarai from the Gia Lai village of Lang Del alleged government discrimination on assistance distribution.

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She claimed that on one occasion the government provided salt to villagers. Protestants were given four boxes, while those who claimed "no religion" received 25 boxes of salt.

#### Little Official Harassment

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¶18. (SBU) Overall, the interviewees did not report significant police or official harassment. The most serious case involved an ethnic Jarai woman in Gia Lai who sought to flee to Cambodia with her husband. She was caught, but her husband was able to cross successfully. She told us that she was detained initially for 24 hours at a provincial military post. After she was sent home, the provincial police came to speak with her twice a day for the first two months. After this initial period, police came to check up on her on a monthly basis. Before traveling to her Visas-93 pre-screening interview in HCMC, police came to visit her again. According to the applicant, police questioned her on why she wanted to move to the U.S. and tried to scare her into not following through by claiming that her family would be split-up upon reaching the United States.

¶19. (SBU) In other cases, five applicants from Gia Lai told us that police visited them immediately after their husbands fled to Cambodia, but were never questioned again. Similarly, police summoned the applicant from Dak Lak immediately after her husband fled. (She said her son also was questioned on whether he had participated in the same protests with his father). Occasionally, police would come to ask her if she had heard from her husband, but there was no harassment. One applicant from Dak Nong and two from Gia Lai told us that they had to seek permission to travel to HCMC for their Visas-93 interviews.

#### Religious Freedom

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¶10. (SBU) Some applicants said that they continue to face restrictions on religious practice. However, overall, the applicants described a general improvement in conditions for religious freedom in their villages. For example, of the seven families in Gia Lai who self-identified as Protestant, four indicated that they have been able to assemble in local house churches over the past year. Three families have only been permitted to pray at home for the past several years, they did not explain why. The family from Dak Lak, also Protestant, said that, since the protests in the province in 2001, they have been unable to gather to worship. (Per refs B and C, provincial governments in Gia Lai and Dak Lak have allowed the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church and some other non-recognized house church groups to gather. However, the provinces maintain tight control on any groups that they believe are promoting ethnic minority separatism.) In Dak Nong province, the two Protestant families said they were able to gather to worship without interference. One of the two families said that this improvement started in 2006.

#### Passports and Documentation

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¶11. (SBU) None of the interviewees had yet obtained their passports. Two families from Gia Lai had applied recently, but the majority were waiting for the results of the Visas 93 interview process. One interviewee from Dak Nong complained that, thus far, she has been unable to obtain certification from her hamlet that would enable her to apply for her passport.

¶12. (SBU) All the applicants were able to obtain from local and provincial officials needed supporting documentation for the Visas-93 interview process including: family registry books, birth certificates, and marriage certificates. None claimed that they had to pay a bribe to obtain the paperwork. One woman from Gia Lai province told us that she tried bribe local police to expedite her documents but it was refused.

#### Anomalies in the Case Files

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¶13. (SBU) One Jarai interviewee presented a false marriage certificate issued in 2005 (after her husband fled to Cambodia). The document was forged with her husband's signature (the interviewee later admitted that her mother signed the document). The applicant had not yet clarified her exact legal status with the Visa-93 petitioner. In other instances, we found that the interviewee's testimony was inconsistent with the statements given by the petitioner in the refugee camp during the asylum-seeking process. For example, an ethnic Bahnar interviewee from Gia Lai province (village of To Drah I), whose husband told interviewers in Cambodia that his house was burned and destroyed by police, told us that her house was never burned and that she has lived in the same house for the past six years

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(dating from before the time her husband fled Vietnam). Another ethnic Jarai woman from Gia Lai, whose husband reportedly told officials in the Cambodian camps that he fled from Vietnam because his house was seized by police and because he had been arrested several times, told us that her husband fled to Cambodia because the government wouldn't let him attend the 10th grade. She added that her home had never been seized and that the police had never arrested her husband. None of the applicants demonstrated any awareness of an ethnic minority separatist movement in the Central Highlands.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The results of these private interviews reinforce our observations that the overall climate for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands continues to gradually improve. That this group was able to travel to HCMC without harassment and applicants now are consistently receiving documents and passports -- including from once-intransigent Dak Lak province -- indicates that the Visas-93 program is becoming more routinized throughout the Central Highlands. Of the

current 170 VISAS-93 cases, 114 families from all five Central Highlands provinces have received passports, or roughly 67 percent of the current Visas-93 caseload. 71 cases -- 275 persons -- or 42 percent of the caseload have departed for the United States. We continue to track the 56 cases/207 persons who have not yet received their passports. Of this cohort, 41 cases/159 persons have been interviewed in HCMC. Another 15 cases/48 persons remain pending. End Comment.  
WINNICK